

Introduction

Storytelling has many varied benefits such as igniting curiosity, reinforcing life lessons, and enhancing brain development (Agosto, 2016). In addition to this, storytelling is an important aspect of language and literacy development in young children. Children who are regularly exposed to a variety of stories from a young age display advanced oral language skills, acquire a greater vocabulary, and learn crucial rules about syntax and sentence formation (Dickinson and Morse, 2019).

Furthermore, storytelling provides a connection between the basic language skills of early childhood and the more formal language of the printed word (Lysaker, 2019, p.2). The practice of storytelling has evolved to encompass more interactive methods including digital books and interactive games in addition to the more traditional practice of shared book reading (Kucirkova, 2018). The art of storytelling is comprised of many different skills but the ones that will be focused upon in this paper will be tone of voice and facial expression and the use of visual aids and questions to extend learning. How storytelling can support children's literacy and oracy development and the benefits and barriers to digital learning will be analysed.

Tone of voice and facial expression

Literacy and language development begin way before birth. It has been proven that children can not only hear in the womb but can distinguish between voices, particularly their mothers, and can be soothed by the rhythms and patterns therein. Babies whose mothers have read to them in utero are calmer and have an increased attention span and concentration after birth (Bower, 2014, p104). The way that adults ordinarily speak to children has an exaggerated rhythm and intonation which can be described as 'singsong' and the language used is normally simplified (Bower, 2014, p105). During storytelling activities, adults are likely to engage in repetition and will speak in short sentences while pointing and naming familiar objects as is depicted in both traditional and digital presentations. During both presentations, the narrator keeps both tone of voice and facial expressions light and positive and gives verbal praise to the children when they volunteer information (Lysaker, 2019, p43). Skinner (1948, Cited in Macblain, 2014, p36) believed that the use of positive reinforcement by verbal praise, positive body language, and facial expressions reinforces learning. Skinner stated that language was learned by repetition and that facial expression,

tone of voice, reinforcement through question and answer, serve and return, aided this learning process.

Meyer *et al.* (1994) discuss a study conducted in 1988 that investigated changes in parents' behaviour while reading. It concluded that changes in facial expression and tone helped to solidify interest in the story and to convey differences in emotion, events, and language (Larson and Marsh, 2014, p96). Within both activities, the narrator alters the tone to signify changes in emotion and to provide anticipation and excitement. Wan (2000) agrees, stating that the style of reading would have a significant impact on children's literacy development.

Visual aids, pointing, and asking questions.

Torr (2019) shows a strong association between shared reading and children's language and literacy development. Parent-child reading before the age of 2 can provide infants with a comprehensive and syntactical introduction to picture books and the written word (Lysaker, 2019, p2). Welsh Government (2019) discusses language development from birth to five years of age and states that typically a child at the age of two to three years can listen to, understand, and participate in a simple story when it is supported by pictures. The activities shown in both videos are aimed at this age group. Torr (2019) also says that infant participation may include naming and touching pictures, turning pages, joining in with familiar rhymes, and speaking in response to adults' questions and comments. Egan *et al.* (2022) state that when an adult reads and draws a child's attention to text and images and talks about the story with the child it enhances vocabulary and comprehension development. During the traditional storytelling activity, the narrator drew the attention of the children towards the pictures while reading the text and asked questions therefore enhancing the understanding of the story (Neaum, 2020). During the digital storytelling activity the narrator was able to zoom in on particular parts of the book to make it easier for the children to see. In both presentations the narrator reinforced the story by pointing at colourful images displayed in the reading area and encouraged the children to join in with counting and sharing information, this both extended and scaffolded the learning experience.

Egan *et al.* (2022) also believe that the quality of reading interactions is just as important as the frequency and should include metalinguistic talk which is associated with greater vocabulary retention.

An enabling adult who involves the child in the story can provide more explicit definitions of words during conversation which deepens the conceptual knowledge (Larson and Marsh, 2014, p24). Repetition, discussions about stories, and the provision of definitions have been found to improve word learning and retention (Bower, 2014, p157). During both activities, the narrator can be heard repeating words and phrases, questioning the children, and reinforcing learning by pointing at pictures and resources (Skibbe, Thompson, and Plavnick, 2018).

How is children's oracy and literacy promoted?

Egan *et al.* (2022) believe that shared reading with children is accepted to be one of the most critical activities for developing literacy and goes on to aid with reading comprehension in later years. Egan *et al.* (2022) also state that reading with very young children fosters literacy and oracy development. Oral storytelling is directly related to dynamic, expressive, and practical language skills. When a child is read only one picture book daily they are exposed to 78,000 words a year and unrestricted access to books in the home can lead to better reading achievement and a more diverse listening and speaking ability (Readingrockets.org, 2023).

Dickinson and Morse (2019) say that it is advantageous for children to be immersed in environments that provide exposure to familiar words on numerous occasions and also provide exposure to brand-new words. In this regard, book reading is the ideal activity. Books are a rich source of varied vocabulary. Speaker, Taylor and Kamen (2004) state that research continues to prove that vocabulary development and the complexity of syntax is more progressive in children who are habitually read a variety of texts. Books have the added advantage of allowing children to hear the same words multiple times and as children hear books being reread, they learn how to use words in sentences, and they can start to understand the definition of a word from the story context and the pictures (Levy, 2011).

Speaker, Taylor and Kamen (2004) discuss the many benefits associated with storytelling including increased listening skills, attention span, accuracy of recall

ability, ability to sequence events efficiently, and fluency in writing (Agosto, 2016). The vocabulary picked to articulate information and the order in which they are placed to construct a meaningful sentence, in addition to the way they are then manipulated to show context, all combine to create deep meaning for children. When children can build words and use them in the correct context even if the language is not quite right it is evidence that all children are born with an innate ability to construct and understand language (Chomsky, cited in Whitehead, 2009, p12). Chomsky (1965, cited in Jarvis, George, and Holland, 2013, p174) believed that infants are born pre-wired for language acquisition whereas Bruner (1983, cited in Jarvis, George, and Holland, 2013, p174) argued that language is essentially embedded in the social and emotional environment the infant inhabits. The first three years of a child's life contribute substantially to children's acquisition of language and their future ability to become skilled communicators.

Speaker, Taylor and Kamen (2004) state that young children naturally enjoy stories, and children that are exposed to regular storytelling episodes exhibit several characteristics related to increased literacy. Better listening skills, advanced vocabulary development, and an improved ability to consolidate narrative thought are just some of these. Storytelling is an essential skill in the development of intellect. Furthermore, storytelling is also a bridge to evolving literacy. In addition to this storytelling is a nurturing activity between adult and child and such activities promote intellectual and social growth. Bowlby (1979, cited in Bradbury and Swailes, 2022, p5) believed that relationships and activities that foster an element of intimacy and warmth enhance a child's security and provide a solid foundation for the child to develop emotionally and intellectually.

Children are valid contributors in the language acquisition process, the interactive nature of circle time and group sharing activities is the recounting of an already experienced event. The language patterns gleaned from these social contexts, when children are interacting with adults and other children in the group, are constructed and reinforced as the teller becomes more fluent in storytelling (Levy, 2011).

Storytelling is a vital skill that can provoke thoughts and create a more ordered sense of the world. Storytelling promotes expressive language development in speech in addition to receptive language development in both reading and listening.

Knauer *et al.* (2020) state that exposure to storybooks has a direct, positive impact on vocabulary and language skills. Durkin (1966, cited in Wan, 2000) conducted a study on early literacy development and found that being read to created and fostered an interest in reading in later life. Meyer *et al.* (2001) state that reading to children in infancy prepares them for learning to read and when practiced habitually even teaches them to read.

How is children's digital literacy promoted?

According to Erstad *et al.* (2020, p1), literary practices have been transformed by the digital world in recent times. Markland and Dunkels (2016) state that learning is incorporated into the concept of digital play and book reading is included in this. 59% of the population have tablets in their houses and 87% of families have several computers, smartphones, and tablets. Two-thirds of two-year-olds have used the internet at least once and one-third use it daily (Erstad *et al.*, 2020, p3). Daniels *et al.* (2020) agree with this and add that for many children in developed countries family life is already permeated by technology. Digital devices are utilised for communication, entertainment and play (Tecce DeCarlo *et al.*, 2018). Studies of digital media use within the home have mapped how children use devices in purposeful, interest-driven ways (Larsen, 2014, p69). Indeed, according to Skibbe, Thompson, and Plavnick (2018), digital books can be more effective in promoting early literacy than printed texts.

It should be mentioned, however, that not all children have access to digital technologies and usage can vary widely between homes (Kucirkova, 2018). Children living in homes less affluent in nature may not have access to digital devices, or they may be of inferior quality, and families may rely on free apps with dense advertising and a lack of creative potential (Daniels *et al.*, 2020). There is also much concern about the suitability of digital technologies for young children and this is linked to issues of safeguarding and the effects of screen time on eyesight, posture, and sleep (Kucirkova, 2018). It is important to recognise that while digital competency is crucial in the modern world, a healthy balance is essential (Daniels *et al.*, 2020).

Daniels *et al.* (2020) discuss how children's digital practices are often highly social and indeed some applications can provide valuable opportunities for children to

engage with the family in real-time. Children are moreover operating as creators and producers of valid digital content rather than just consumers in the modern age (Larsen, 2014, p.88).

Upon reviewing the recorded activities, it is clear that during the digital storytelling activity, the narrator is not as fluid as in the traditional storytelling activity, and perhaps children would be more familiar with this method than some practitioners, who may prefer the traditional method. Overall, group storytelling activities are easier using the more traditional methods, and digital use would be better-appropriated one-on-one or completely child-led (Kucirkova, 2018, p54).

Conclusion

From the information provided in this paper, the following conclusions can be drawn. It is imperative that in the modern-day attention should be given to both traditional and digital activities within home and childcare settings. When used in conjunction with each other these valid experiences support both literacy and oracy and digital literacy development. Given the limitations discussed within the paper, it is expected that future practice will continue with traditional storybook reading but be reinforced digitally with interactive games and exercises to stimulate children and extend the learning opportunity.

Reference List

Agosto, D.E. (2016) 'Why Storytelling Matters: Unveiling the Literacy Benefits of Storytelling', *Children & Libraries*, 14(2), 21–. <https://doi.org/10.5860/cal.14n2.21> (Accessed: 14 October 2023).

Bower, V. (Ed.) (2014) *Developing Early Literacy 0-8*. London: SAGE Publications.

Bradbury, A., and Swailes, R. (2022) *Early Childhood Theories Today*. London: SAGE Publications.

Daniels, K., Bower, K., Burnett, C., Escott, H., Hatton, A., Ehiyazaryan-White, E., and Monkhouse, J. (2019) 'Early years teachers and digital literacies: Navigating a kaleidoscope of discourses', *Education and Information Technologies*, 25, pp. 2415-2426. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-019-10047-9> (Accessed: 17 October 2023).

Dickinson, D.K. and Morse, A.B. (2019) *Connecting through talk: nurturing children's development with language*. Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

Egan, S.M., Moloney, M., Pope, J., Breatnach, D., and Hoyne, C. (2022) 'From stories at bedtime to a love of reading: Parental practices and beliefs about reading with infants', *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*. Available at: <https://doi-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/10.1177/14687984221123710> (Accessed: 20 October 2023).

Erstad, O., Flewitt, R., Kümmerling-Meibauer, B., and, Pires Pereira, I.S. (eds) (2020) *The Routledge Handbook of digital literacies in early childhood*. Routledge.

Jarvis, P., George, J., and Holland, W. (2013) *The Early Years Professional's Complete Companion*. 2nd Edn. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

Knauer, H.A., Jakiela, P., Ozier, O., Aboud, F., and Fernald, L.C.H. (2020) 'Enhancing young children's language acquisition through parent-child book-sharing: A randomized trial in rural Kenya', *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 50(2020), pp. 179-190. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2019.01.002> (Accessed: 14 October 2023).

Kucirkova, N. (2018) *How and Why to Read and Create Children's Digital Books: A Guide for Primary Practitioners*, 1st Edn. UCL Press.

<https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781787353473> (Accessed: 14 October 2023).

Larson, J. and Marsh, J. (2014) *Making literacy real: Theories and Practices for Teaching and Learning*. London: SAGE Publications.

Levy, R. (2011) *Young Children reading at home and at school*. London: SAGE Publications.

Lysaker, J.T. (2019) *Before Words: wordless picture books and the development of reading in young children*. Teacher College Press.

Macblain, S. (2014) *How children learn*. London: SAGE Publications.

Marklund, L. and Dunkels, E. (2016) 'Digital play as a means to develop children's literacy and power in the Swedish preschool', *Early Years*, 36(3), pp. 289-304.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575416.2016.1181608> (Accessed: 17 October 2023).

Meyer, L., Stahl, S.A., Linn, R.L., and Wardrop, J.L. (1994) 'Effects of Reading Storybooks Aloud to Children', *The Journal of Educational Research (Washington, D.C)*, 88(2), pp. 69-85. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220671.1994.9944821> (Accessed: 17 October 2023).

Neaum, S. (2020) 'Engaging with literacy provision in the early years: Language use and emergent literacy in child-initiated play', *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 20(4), pp. 680–705. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468798418783310> (Accessed: 14 October 2023).

Reading Rockets (2023) *When Children are not read to at home: Million-word gap*. Available at: <https://www.readingrockets.org/resources/resource-library/when-children-are-not-read-home-million-word-gap> (Accessed: 18 October 2023).

Skibbe, L.E., Thompson, J.L., and Plavnick, J.B. (2018) 'Preschoolers Visual Attention during Electronic Storybook Reading as Related to Different Types of Textual Supports', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46, pp. 419-426. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-017-0876-4> (Accessed: 21 October 2023).

Speaker, K.M, Taylor, D., and Kamen, R. (2004) 'Storytelling: Enhancing Language Acquisition in Young Children', *Education (Chula Vista)*, 125(1), pp. 3-14. Available at: <https://web-s-ebshost-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/ehost/detail/detail?vid=1&sid=49a9fde6-3af4-4b37-847d-9db1e132cadd%40redis&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWwhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#AN=15068404&db=aph> (Accessed: 14 October 2023).

Tecce DeCarlo, M.J., Grant, A., Lee, V.J., and Neuman, D. (2018) 'Information and Digital Literacies in a Kindergarten Classroom: An I-LEARN Case Study', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46, pp. 265-275. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-017-0857-7> (Accessed: 21 October 2023).

Torr, J. (2019) 'Infants' Experiences of Shared Reading with Their Educators in Early Childhood Education and Care Centres: An Observational Study', *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 47, pp. 519-529. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-019-00948-2> (Accessed: 20 October 2023).

Wan, G. (2000) 'Reading aloud to children: the past, the present and the future', *Reading Improvement; Winter 2000*, 37(4), pp. 148-160. Available at: <https://search-ebshost-com.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eue&AN=507738812&site=ehost-live> (Accessed: 20 October 2023).

Welsh Government (2019) *Stages of Speech and Language Development*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/inline-documents/2019-05/stages-speech-and-language-en.pdf> (Accessed on: 20 October 2023).

Whitehead, M. (2009) *Supporting language and literacy development in the Early Years*. 2nd Edn. Open University Press.